

Senate Bill 344  
February 10, 2009  
Presented by Chris Smith  
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for the record I am Chris Smith, Deputy Director of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. I am here to today in support of SB 344.

Wolf recovery has brought many challenges to the people of Montana and to Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP). Limiting and responding to wolf predation on livestock is a major issue. FWP and livestock producers have enough problems on their hands with wild, free-ranging wolves, without adding feral wolf-hybrids to the mix. Recent experience in eastern Montana, near Jordan, clearly illustrates the point.

Although the idea of having a wolf hybrid as a pet is alluring for many people, too often the reality turns out to be something quite different. Wolf hybrids retain many of the aggressive and, frankly, dangerous traits that humans have bred out of domestic dogs over the past 20 – 30,000 years. Unfortunately, in some cases, when these animals have become too large or aggressive for the owners to manage, they are released into the wild.

Because feral wolf hybrids lack the socialization and learned predation skills of wild wolves, they often become problem animals when/if they are not confined or if they escape. They may remain in close proximity to humans, but depredate on livestock or potentially create a threat to human safety.

Existing rules define a wolf hybrid as an animal that contains at least 50% wolf genes, and requires those that meet this definition to be permanently tattooed. However, this definition is arbitrary, since it is not possible to determine genetic composition based on physical appearance, and the technology to determine actual percent wolf composition of an animal is lacking as well. So basically, current statutes do not provide FWP, or any other entity of government, clear authority to require marking of wolf hybrids, or regulate trade with these animals. FWP rules have attempted to address wolf hybrids, but the current definition, which relies on genetic attributes, is not as effective as it could be. This is because it is difficult, if not impossible to distinguish between a “dog” and a wolf hybrid based solely on genetics.

SB 344 makes it clear that a wolf hybrid is any large canine that the owner claims to be a wolf hybrid. It allows those individuals who currently own a wolf hybrid in Montana to retain the animal, as long as they meet marking and reporting requirements. Neither current owners nor anyone else can breed, import or sell any additional wolf hybrids, with the exception of permitted zoos or menageries. Thus, within one “wolf” generation there should be no more pet wolf hybrids in Montana.

Unlike another controversial bill in this session that sought to ban one particular breed of domestic dog, SB 344 deals with hybrids of domestic dogs and wolves. We agree with Senator Peterson that the problems associated with owning these animals outweigh the individual prerogative of having a wolf hybrid as a pet.

FWP urges your support for SB 344.